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Ambiguity of Purpose and the Politics of Failure: Sustainability as Macromarketing's Compelling Political Calling

Andrea Prothero and Pierre McDonagh

Andrea Prothero, Professor of Business and Society, University College Dublin, Centre for Business and Society (CeBaS), College of Business, Belfield, Dublin, Ireland, Tel + 353 1 716 4737 Email: andrea.prothero@ucd.ie

Pierre McDonagh, Professor of Marketing, School of Management, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, Tel +44 1225 386486 Email: p.mcdonagh@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

In this commentary we provide a brief review of sustainability research in the journal since its inception. Next, we offer an opinion on macromarketing's ambiguity to sustainability as a political project and a resultant failure to provide substantial emphasis beyond the Development School for solutions in the field. Despite macromarketing's centrality to marketing theory, the work in the journal has not had the impact it deserves in wider sustainability discourses. As two macromarketers with a lifelong interest in sustainability, we argue for more political reflection within the journal. We contend these current times of crisis require us to better listen to and act on prior counsel from critical and political perspectives within the journal, and submit, à la George Fisk, the journal's first editor, that the politics of the day demand a persistence to continue to ask difficult questions. From a sustainability perspective this would be to consider how best to engender future macromarketing research in the field as a political project.

Keywords

Critical perspectives, macromarketing, political project, sustainability, sustainable consumption

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies

disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less travelled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth. (Rachel Carson, 1962)

At the 2001 macromarketing conference we had the great privilege of being invited to dinner by George and Neva Fisk in Williamsburg, Virginia. Over dinner, with our two young children, then aged 1 and 4, we discussed a whole manner of issues with Neva and George and received wonderful parenting and academic advice from them both. It was one of those moments when you get to meet an academic whose writings changed how you think of the world, and we will treasure it greatly. As the first editor of this journal and the author of a number of works relating to sustainability we were particularly keen to hear George's thoughts on the future of sustainability, and indeed in researching marketing from both a critical and societal perspective – not always the same thing. Two things have stayed with us and have contributed to our continued critical research perspectives in marketing, which explores the “intersections among markets, marketing and society.” George's words of wisdom were to continue to ask difficult questions, in terms of the research we conduct, and of the academy in which we find ourselves. Thus, it is with these questions in mind that we write this commentary for the journal's ruby anniversary issue. And, we do so with gratitude to George and Neva for their sage advice.

We have between us organized two Annual Macromarketing conferences, once in 1999 in Nebraska and again in 2001 at the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. We have been Sustainability Track Chairs eight times between 2004 and 2016. We have had the great privilege, between us, of publishing five articles in this journal (also with our esteemed colleagues and great friends, William E. (Bill) Kilbourne (1997), James Fitchett (2000), Lisa O'Malley, Maurice Patterson (2008), Susan Dobscha and Pat Brereton (2010)), and guest

edited two special issues on Sustainability (a first for the journal) in 2014 and 2015, under the editorship of the wonderful Terry Witkowski.

We have come a long way since the first article in the *Journal of Macromarketing* by Sjolander and Chen in 1989, which explored sustainable legislation. There are now over 60 sustainability articles in the journal. Below, we offer a brief reflection on sustainability research over the past 40 years, pay specific focus to several of the key contributions which we feel deserve more attention, before finally arguing for a focus on the political moving forward.

1981-2001

With its establishment in 1981, the first editor of the journal noted that “our primary goal is to provide a forum in which people can debate and clarify the role of marketing in society” (Fisk 1981). Since then, macromarketers have repeatedly told of the need to act on the ecological crisis. The 1990s and early work in the 2000s saw conceptual work by William E. Kilbourne, Pierre McDonagh, Andrea Prothero and James Fitchett. Other work focused on specific topics - environmental advertising (Carlson *et al.* 1996), regulatory frameworks for sustainable marketing (Van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996), morality (Crane 2000), and within specific contexts – e.g. deforestation (Harvey 1995). One paper (Crane 2000) argued for a greater analysis of morality and the contradictions of sustainable consumption,

In a sense, this suggests that the macromarketing roots of green marketing that provided a critical position toward ever-increasing consumption (as exemplified, for example, by Fisk 1973, 1974) have not been meaningfully revisited. According to Kilbourne and Beckmann (1998), though, something of an incipient shift toward these macromarketing perspectives might be beginning to (re)emerge, with renewed attention being focused on the contradictions of sustainable consumption within late capitalist society.

In his discussion of the morality of the reconstructivist argument Crane (2000, 151) submits,

The project then is one of promoting “political and ethical deliberation” among academics, practitioners, consumers, and citizens and of finding a place for marketing in informing society of its environmentally destructive institutional makeup.

We would be remiss not to mention that during this time the interdisciplinary journal *Consumption, Markets & Culture* was established by two macromarketers, Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh, in 1997 in order to provide space for more radical, critical and cultural perspectives. And, in 2001 *Marketing Theory* was launched; and, as with *CMC* has provided another welcome outlet for societal research.

2002 to 2010

The 2000s saw the first Special Issue of this *Journal* on Sustainability “*The Challenge of Sustainability in a Changing World*”, edited by Bill Kilbourne. The key focus for Bill’s SI was an emphasis on papers, which were truly macro in focus and which also went beyond the traditional focus in mainstream journals. The eight papers in the SI were diverse and focused on sustainable consumption (Assadourian 2010, Thøgersen 2010), sustainable societies (Varey 2010), and sustainable market orientation (Mitchell, Wooliscroft and Higham 2010).

It is perhaps Varey’s (2010, 123) thinking that makes the clearest point for readers of the *Journal* of which we should be mindful,

Wrong thinking about life entrusts neo-liberal economics and capitalism to find the solution to how to live a better life. Wrong thinking in economics assumes humans as rational, selfish, maximizers. Wrong thinking in marketing uncritically takes the

neoclassical market model and its neoliberal purpose. Transformative change is needed to combat and repair the degradation. For that we need to change our thinking about the problem and the means to the solution.

Within this time frame we also saw a significant but somewhat neglected contribution from Dolan (2002),

Viewing consumption as *simply* the problem follows a somewhat etic and positivistic perspective—an aerial view of sustainable development. We must seek to develop understandings that also incorporate the meanings and practices of consumption. It is vital to understand it as a cultural process from within as well as without. It is only in this way that the external view that sees the ecological and long-term effects of increasing consumption can be translated through the meaning complexes of consumers, individually and collectively (Dolan 2002, 171).

Another paper in this vein, which we feel has not received the attention it deserves is Schaefer and Crane (2005, 88) who observe,

Yet it has to be recognized that many governments, particularly those espousing a free-market orientation, have shown themselves to be quite reluctant to take any policy measures aimed at curbing consumption and thus industrial activity (Cohen 2001)..... Explanations for this are not too hard to come by. We could follow the reasoning of Karl Marx that political superstructures are always determined by the economic substructure and that governments are therefore generally the willing assistants of the economically powerful forces in society.

In this regard it seems evident that the message was communicated loud and clear on several instances in this *Journal*, which point to the need for sustainability generally, and sustainable consumption more specifically, to be theorized in macromarketing as a political project.

2011 to date

Elsewhere within the business and marketing academy the sustainability discourse picked up pace, so it is not surprising there was an increase of interest during this period. This period saw a double SI on *Sustainability as Megatrend*, edited by us, and was the first time a SI of the journal ran to two issues. The two SIs continued with the main criteria utilized by Kilbourne in 2010. In total 16 diverse papers were published, with 41 authors based in nine countries. Conceptual, empirical and historical pieces were explored. Sustainability research has also continued more recently, on a variety of issues such as the arguments for de-growth (Lloveras and Quinn 2016) and with Gupta, Gwodz and Gentry (2019) exploring sustainable fashion.

In 2020, the aims of the journal are as follows:

The Journal of Macromarketing is primarily a marketing journal (although it includes a wide range of social science disciplines) that focuses on important societal issues as they are affected by marketing and on how society affects the conduct of marketing. The journal covers macromarketing areas such as marketing and public policy, marketing and development, marketing and the quality of life, and the history of marketing. (<https://journals.sagepub.com/aims-scope/JMK>)

While sustainability is not explicitly mentioned, it is seen as an important topic for the *Journal*, and we both serve as AEs with a sustainability focus. And, the journal continues its

focus stated earlier in 1981 with an aim to focus on the “intersections among markets, marketing and society”. Figures provided to us by Sage (April 2020) also highlight how seven of the top 20 most downloaded papers in the *Journal* are from the 2010, 2014 and 2015 sustainability special issues (Ertekin and Atik 2015; Beverland 2014; Assadourian 2010; Ekström and Salomonson 2014; Mitchell Wooliscroft and Higham 2010; Thørgersen 2010, Mittelstaedt *et al* 2014) and seven sustainability papers are included in the top 20 most cited papers within Web of Science (Thørgersen 2010; Prothero, McDonagh and Dobscha 2010; Mitchell; Varey 2010; Assadourian 2010; Mittelstaedt *et al* 2014; Ertekin and Atik 2015).

From a sustainability perspective, what then do we suggest for future research within macromarketing?

Asking Difficult Questions – The Future for Sustainability Macromarketing Research

It seems apt that our suggestions for the future revolve around asking difficult questions, as per George’s advice in 2001. We argue, that macromarketing has vacillated and failed to make sustainability primarily a political project. This has left our subfield on the periphery of sustainability scholarship despite being an early mover in the discourse. This goes against early advice offered to us by sociologists such as Paddy Dolan (2002, 180),

As both Featherstone (1991) and Slater (1997a) have commented, there is still a need to locate changes in the nature of consumption practices in the politics of social alliances, oppositions, and struggles. There is a need to contextualize consumer practices and desires in terms of social relations, structures, institutions, and systems (Slater 1997a). Essentially, the goal of sustainable consumption needs to be seen as a political project.

We agree with Dolan (2002), and not only from a consumption perspective, but more widely too. Thus, as we aim to understand the (im)possibility of sustainable consumption within a wider sustainable society, we should chart its progress within the historical flow and flux of social and cultural forces. For us, the journal has seen this flux manifest in its hesitancy and this in turn has implications for its perceived relevance in debates and policy formation around sustainability within the wider academy. This is evidenced by other marketing journals, such as the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 2011 convening Special Issues on Sustainability that do not engage meaningfully with macromarketing scholarship. Despite macromarketing's undisputed theoretical centrality to the field of marketing as a whole (Wilkie and Moore 2006). we note that few have risen to the political challenge, and this is especially so within the sustainability field. While a former editor, Clifford J. Shultz, along with other colleagues too, have attempted to shape policy, particularly in war ravaged nations (see for example Shultz et al. (2005) Shultz (2007; 2012), Sredl et al. (2017), Barrios et al. (2016), elsewhere in macromarketing such political mobilization is in short supply. Perhaps it is a nettle deemed too risky to grasp. In 2014, (Mittelstaedt *et al.*, 253) emphasize,

There is a Developmental School of Macromarketing that sees markets and marketing as fundamental tools for social development and human welfare. As well, there is a Critical School of Macromarketing, which is more suspect of the social consequences of markets and marketing. Put another way, the Developmental School sees markets and marketing systems as part of the solution to the problems of the human condition; the Critical School sees markets and marketing as part of the problem.

We argue that the emphasis in our *Journal* has seen a shift towards developmental and systems perspectives, and call for the critical school to re-emerge. We believe there has been a leaning toward a somewhat 'evangelical' belief by many in the macro community of the need

to ‘save the world’ through macromarketing (Fisk 2001). While we agree with many of George’s perspectives on sustainability and responsible consumption, and his words from the 1970s are as prescient now as they were then, we do not believe macromarketing can save the world, or that a developmental, systems perspective is the preferred way forward, despite its recent popularity. We continue to believe that in continuing to think about the climate crisis and how we solve this, and other, sustainability problems require new solutions. Consequently, we argue that while developmental macromarketers can consider how markets and marketing can contribute to improving human welfare, this will not be enough if we do not change how we think about the problem politically and what solutions we provide as a consequence. Writing elsewhere (Kilbourne McDonagh and Prothero 2018) have noted the politics of sustainable consumption is best explained by the Gramscian concepts of *hegemony* and *passive revolution* that can lead to the evolution of the static concept of the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP), making it more consistent with social, cultural, political and economic change. These concepts themselves are clearly influenced by Leninist thought (see Bates 1975). In this way, we argue sustainability macromarketing research should be prioritized as a political project with community and personal and collective well-being at its heart.

Moving forward, we argue to muster support for some of the issues raised by the macromarketing scholars we discuss above, many of which have not received the attention they deserve in our journal, to come to the fore. We expect to see continued developmental works focus on how macromarketing can aid social development and human welfare, particularly within the systems arm of the discipline. However, we argue that to operationalize sustainability and avoid the catastrophe we are hurtling towards macromarketing research as a global political project is needed now more than ever. In 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), produced a report on the climate crisis. The hard-hitting report was based on reviews of over 7,000 scientific publications, with 100+ authors, from 36 countries,

and from diverse scientific disciplines. In sum, they noted, we have 12 years in which we need to keep global warming to a maximum of 1.5C (with no leeway for going above this). By the time this Ruby anniversary issue is in print this will be 9 years. If we do not achieve this goal the outcome for the planet and its inhabitants is catastrophic. The IPCC lay out four possible pathways to ensure we stick within the 1.5C temperature range. They also point out that whether or not any of these pathways is successful will depend on political will. It is imperative that we see governments at supra, national and local levels come together to bring about this change – otherwise our grandchildren will be viewing the Statute of Liberty under water in 50 (yes, 50) years.

What role then for macromarketers within this agenda? First, and foremost, we recognize that a consumption ideology, which permeates our way of life, can only persist if such an ideology can be achieved in a carbon neutral way. This requires support for innovation, creativity and technological advances to ensure today's consumption practices are not a danger to future generations. Business needs to step up to the plate – eliminating planned obsolescence, for example, would be a good start. Entire industries can switch from a carbon-based economy to a bio-circular one. Putting all the onus on consumers and businesses however is not the answer. While the neoliberal ideal has seen a fixation on responsabilization for all of society's ills, including the destruction of our planet, such an approach will not allow us to stop falling over that cliff in about nine years' time. Yes, business needs to be on board, yes, consumers can help, but ultimately the will and the actions which follow must be political ones. Macromarketing research, which embraces the political is crucial. A perspective that focuses on the politics of sustainability is needed, and another neglected macromarketing scholar Richard Varey (2010, 2013), Kadirov and Varey (2014) gives us some hope in this regard. They outline communitarian marketing, which takes the view of individuals who care for the wider community and shared utilities. The emphasis here being not for any one school of

thought, but rather for a wisdom and politics of ‘working together’ with well-being related to the welfare of all. “Wisdom is the realization that more than one alternative exists in terms of construing individual lives” Kadirov and Varey (2014, 201) and thus requires combining different paradigmatic views. We submit Sustainability should be seen as a political project for collective well-being within society and that macromarketers should argue for collective efforts to provision for and enable the realization of a Sustainability for all of us. In many respects this echoes another relatively neglected contribution in the *Journal* by Ashlee Humphreys (2015, 278),

this research was conducted with an eye towards understanding the role that social and cultural processes have in constituting markets. While previous research on corporate social responsibility has focused on initiatives at the firm- level or in localized interaction with consumers and products, this research has attempted to better understand what CSR is and how it changes using the theory of structuration. With a complex issue like sustainability, only by approaching the issue at a societal level can we hope to fully understand it.

In asking difficult questions we argue the socio-political continues to be neglected and as such we have lost our political calling. As a consequence, we remain in debt to George Fisk. We do not believe it makes sense to focus on a Development School as ‘solution’ and a Critical School as ‘problem’ -- it is more complex than that and we need both approaches to ask challenging questions. Instead, what is required is sustainability macromarketing research as a political project – aiming to address the critical questions and problems and create solutions simultaneously. As a start we need a balanced manifesto for sustainability. For example, first we need to meticulously scrutinize the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and question are they delivering welfare for all. This means checking if the SDGs are

lifting people out of poverty, preventing world hunger, engendering gender equality, and sustainable consumption and production. How is it possible to ensure the SDGs are attainable for everyone on the planet in a peaceful and harmonious manner? Whose interests do the current SDGs serve in the market? Do the SDGs shift the focus away from preoccupation around the logic of privatisation within society as Bradshaw highlights (2017) towards a more commons approach which makes clear the politics of everybody? And, this in mind with our existing resources and provisioning systems, then we need to wholeheartedly campaign for communitarian marketing. Good people, now is not the time to remain silent.

Conclusions

Finally, we are privileged and honored to have been asked to contribute to the Ruby Special Issue. A big thank you to both Cliff and Bill for inviting us to opine. We are also grateful to the many wonderful scholars and colleagues, many of whom have now become friends, we have met and interacted with over the years. We hope that the journey continues into the future and this ruby anniversary issue will see us living in more hopeful times. And, while we do not believe that macromarketing can save the world, we do believe it can contribute to making the world a better place, where nations collaborate in times of crises and resist the return to nationalism. This we surmise requires the continued support of difficult questions which help us prevail into the future. Our advice to future macromarketers, regardless of their research endeavors, would echo those of George Fisk – ask difficult questions not just of others but especially of ourselves as macromarketers, and also help our students to be the change we wish for society.

As we sign off, we raise a virtual glass to difficult questions and those, before and after us, brave enough to ask them. The role of the macromarketing community is to listen, while simultaneously providing structures and processes to allow such questions to be asked and

acted upon. It transpires that in order to produce the meaningful change now and piece together the jigsaw, we need to know who in macromarketing has the political pieces to hand? As such we give the final voice to the prophetic words of Rachel Carson (1962):

When one is concerned with the mysterious and wonderful functioning of the human body, cause and effect are seldom simple and easily demonstrated relationships. They may be widely separated both in space and time. To discover the agent of disease and death depends on a patient piecing together of many seemingly distinct and unrelated facts developed through a vast amount of research in widely separated fields.

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Andrea Prothero and Pierre McDonagh
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